

THE PLAGUE OF DARKNESS: HYSTERICAL BLINDNESS?

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THE PLAGUE OF DARKNESS

The biblical sources for the ninth¹ of the ten plagues, darkness, seem to imply three gradations of severity and/or incapacitation:

1. *...that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt...* (Exodus 10:21)
2. *even darkness which may be felt* (Exodus 10:21)
3. *...and there was a thick darkness² in all the land of Egypt three days* (Exodus 10:22)

The Bible scholar, S.R. Driver, wrote in his commentary to the book of Exodus (Ex. 10:23) regarding the plague of darkness:

“What is here described is evidently miraculous. But it is said that the sand clouds of the Hamsin sometimes travel in streaks . . . The darkness was no doubt occasioned really by a sand-storm produced by the hot electrical wind called the Hamsin, which in Egypt blows in most years intermittently – usually for two or three days at a time, from the S., SE., or SW., during some 50 days in spring (hence its name ‘hamsin’ = fifty). These winds spring up for the most part suddenly. They are violent and often as hot as the air of an oven . . . Men and animals alike are greatly distressed by the sand and heat. The sand penetrates everywhere and while the storm lasts people are obliged to remain secluded in their houses. On account of the sand and dust the darkness is really such as it ‘can be felt’. . . A sandstorm producing darkness so intense that it was thought the end of the world had come.”³

In addition to Driver’s astute qualities as a gifted biblical textual master, he was also a pioneer in the interface between Hebrew and other Semitic languages. In the BDB lexicon we find the gradations of increasing severity in the three biblical citations of the darkness which typified the ninth plague, darkness.⁴

1. *darkness* = “grow dark...darkness in death” (pp.364-5)

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2. *darkness which may be felt* = “feel...grope of the blind” (p.607)
3. *a thick darkness* = supernatural darkness...gloom of the underworld” (p.66)

The plague of darkness was not a usual type of darkness. The purpose of the plague was to render the Egyptian population incapacitated, to ‘feel’ impending death and to be unable to see in the darkness.

Josephus describes the plague of darkness as “a thick darkness without the least light spread itself over the Egyptians whereby their sight being obstructed and their breathing hindered by the thickness of the air, they died miserably and under a terror lest they should be swallowed up by the dark cloud.”⁵ Louis Feldman noted the difference between Josephus’ description of the plague and the philosophical allegorical commentary of Philo of Alexandria: “Josephus does not resort to rationalization whereas Philo tries to offer a scientific explanation in his suggestion that the darkness was possibly caused by an eclipse of the sun or by a cutting off of the stream of rays through continuous clouds compressed with great force into masses of unbroken density.”⁶

The classical Jewish commentators attempted to define the level of incapacitation. Abraham Ibn Ezra , (Exodus 10:21), noted: “They (the Egyptians) felt the darkness with their hands because it was so thick that light from a fire or candle would not ignite, and one could not see the other...” Ibn Ezra then goes on to describe a personal encounter with an unusual darkness: “In the Atlantic Ocean a thick darkness could arise where man cannot distinguish between day or night. This could sometimes last five days. And I was there on numerous occasions.” Nahmanides remarked (Exodus 10:23) that the darkness was not just the absence of light, but was a “tangible, very thick fog-like atmosphere that extinguished any fire or flame.”⁷

Not being able to see or find one’s way, being unable to stand-up after being seated or to sit after being in a standing position (as per Exodus 10:23), gave the afflicted person a feeling of impending death. This is alluded to in *Midrash Tanhūmah*: “When God created the world, from the first day of creation, He created the Angel of Death. This understanding is derived from the biblical verse: *with darkness upon the face of the deep* (Genesis 1:2). This is the Angel of Death who brings darkness upon the faces of people.”⁸

In the set of admonitions if God’s commandments are not followed, we note the following: *The Lord will smite thee with madness and with blind-*

ness...and thou shall grope at noonday as the blind gropeth in darkness... (Deuteronomy, 28:28-29). Blindness and darkness are intimately connected.

In the New Testament we find the story of Elymas, a Jew who is known as a sorcerer, and is opposed to Paul the Apostle.⁹ Because of this opposition, Paul claims that God had decided to make Elymas temporarily blind. A cloud of darkness immediately begins blocking his sight: “And now behold the hand of the Lord is upon thee and thou shalt be blind...and immediately there fell on him a mist, a darkness...” (Acts 13:11). Again we see a clear connection between darkness and blindness.

Josephus felt that the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt included the Hebrew nation that left Egypt.¹⁰ Many scholars dispute Josephus’ theory. We, however, include this historical footnote because at the time of the Hyksos rule in Egypt, the mythological deities, Apophis (also known as Apep or Apepi, the same name as the pharaoh) and Ra were an integral part of the Egyptian culture. Apep was a deity who embodied chaos and was the opponent of light and order. In artwork, Apep is drawn as a snake-god who tries to devour the sun every day. His counterpart, Ra, was the sun-god who destroys Apep. A constant battle exists between light and darkness that eventually culminates in the devouring of darkness.

DARKNESS AND BLINDNESS

We would like to postulate that the plague of darkness as described in the book of Exodus (10:21-23), with its gradations of severity and incapacitation,¹¹ is ultimately a collective hysterical blindness. The biblical text seems to imply a progressive intensification of ‘darkness.’ First there is an announcement, a general statement, by God to Moses: *that there may be darkness* (Exodus 10:21). Afterwards, *Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven* (Exodus 10:22). Then an initial description of the darkness that is about to come is given: *even darkness which may be felt* (Exodus 10:21). And finally, the plague of darkness takes place and is emphatically described: *and there was a thick darkness* (Exodus 10:22).

Jacques Derrida, a Jewish French philosopher, is best known for developing a philosophical understanding of meaning and understanding known as deconstruction.¹² In this approach, ‘darkness’ is the central term while the descriptions are marginalized terms to the centrality of the theme darkness:

“which may be felt” and “thick”. They serve to define for us this unique darkness that became an unusual phenomena known as a plague.

An historical analysis of hysterical blindness points to the possibility of hysterical amaurosis.¹³ This eye condition can present as temporary or permanent blindness. The darkening of vision combined with a ‘feeling’ that this blindness (which later lifted) felt heavy, gives us the impression that we are looking at a unique transient loss of vision.

TRANSIENT LOSS OF VISION

The plagues that God brought upon the Egyptians were time limited. *Midrash Tanhumah* notes that the time frame for each plague was thirty days.¹⁴ Within this time period, Moses negotiated with Pharaoh for three weeks and the plague itself lasted only seven days: *And seven days were fulfilled* (Exodus, 7:25). If the plague of darkness lasted only seven days, then the ‘blindness’ was transient.

Amaurosis fugax is a temporary loss of vision that usually occurs in only one eye, but may occur in both eyes.¹⁵ Amaurosis is from the Greek meaning: dark or obscure. Fugax is from the Latin meaning: flight or fleeting. Together we have the unusual state of: a feeling of a “fleeting darkening”¹⁶ that leads to a feeling of blindness – which, after a brief period of time, abates. Those who suffered from transient visual loss have reported “blank or fuzzy vision” (‘negative visual phenomena’). Less commonly, the patient describes flashes, sparkles or scintillations (‘positive visual phenomena’).¹⁷

The Egyptians as a collective group have already suffered through eight plagues. They are aware of the dialogue between their Pharaoh and the leader of the Hebrew slaves, Moses. They must have been feeling that there is no hope and that they are impotent to prevent other tragedies from occurring. They have been traumatized. And now comes the ninth plague, darkness. Transient blindness may be posttraumatic. “Posttraumatic transient cortical blindness is thought to be due to transient hypoxia¹⁸ and cerebral dysfunction.”¹⁹ This could explain the blindness. And the *darkness which may be felt* (Exodus 10:21) could be a description of a form of paresthesia of the fingers which often accompanies the amaurosis.²⁰

HYSTERICAL BLINDNESS

Another avenue to explore to explain this blindness is the psychiatric route: hysterical blindness. Modern psychiatric diagnoses and classifications call this a conversion disorder. Presenting symptomatology may include blindness, paralysis and/or other neurological symptoms that cannot be medically explained. There are recorded historical documentations that describe this condition dating back to 1825 BCE. In the Kahun Papyrus,²¹ hysterical disorders in women were described. In the Greek and Roman world, there are numerous cases of women manifesting hysterical symptoms. In the Middle Ages, women, sorcery and witchcraft were co-mingled to account for a demonic anti-church heresy that traced its sources back to an hysterical causation. It wasn't until the 18th century that men were also 'accorded' the diagnostic title of 'hysterics.'²² In line with this understanding, modern psychiatry changed the diagnostic focus from 'hysteria' to a dissociative disorder.

To further our position regarding the plague of darkness as manifesting symptoms of hysterical blindness, we can look at how cultural groups exhibit certain psychiatric/psychological disorders that are treated by a culturally specific 'curer.' We can see a merger of several phenomena that are at work. Landy describes what occurs: "The curer's role is endowed with power precisely because it stands at the interstices of religion, magic and the social system."²³ The environment of stress and social uncertainty²⁴ only exacerbates the situation. The Egyptians looked to their Pharaoh as the all-encompassing leader who worked in tandem with the gods. Now, after eight plagues, they are witness to the impotence of their protectors and are suddenly thrust into an unknown situation that is continuously maintained. A new leader (Moses) with his own Deity is controlling their destiny. A new religion is setting the rules and magic is changing their world.

We observed a gradation of intensity in the biblical description of the ninth plague of darkness. As noted earlier, we find interesting parallels in biblical verses in Deuteronomy (28:28-29) that are part of the enumeration of curses that may befall those who disobey the words of God.

Exodus 10:21-22

1. *darkness*
2. *darkness which may be felt*
3. *a thick darkness*

Deuteronomy 28:28-29

1. *smite thee...with blindness*
2. *as the blind gropeth*
3. *in darkness*

In the first example (1), a collective term is used to denote the concept: 'darkness' and 'blindness'. In the second example (2), the same Hebrew root, 'to feel' is used as: 'felt' and as 'gropeth'. In the last example (3), the term 'darkness' is the same in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. The same Hebrew root, 'dark' is used, although it is a feminized form (*afaila*, in Hebrew) rather than a masculine form (*afel*, in Hebrew).²⁵

Two classical Jewish commentators, Abraham Ibn Ezra and Isaac Abravanel, both note that blindness may be due to hysteria. Ibn Ezra (Deuteronomy 28:28) remarks that the origin of the blindness "is in the heart." However Abravanel (Exodus 10:21) offers a fascinating explanation of the source of the blindness that the Bible mentions:

"The blindness is related to the threat of the enemy...it is not an illness unto itself...God brings this upon the people due to fear of the enemy who wreak havoc that they see with their own eyes...From things that occur they become crazy and blind. Just like those who went through repeated terrible things one after the other. It made them crazy, their hearts twisted within them, and the light of their eyes is no longer...The blindness does not stem from occlusions in the brain. Rather it emanates from the traumas wrought by the enemy that are continually occurring and coagulates their blood²⁶...Their mind doesn't think clearly and their sight is distorted..."

Abravanel's idea that a threat or fear can bring on blindness to a group of people can be seen in two other biblical sources: In Sodom, *and they smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness...so that they wearied themselves to find the door* (Genesis 19:11), and with Elisha, *Elisha prayed unto the Lord and said: Smite this people I pray Thee with blindness* (II Kings 6:18).

While both of these sources relate to a group of persons who were blinded, the blinding was to extricate the 'good people' (Lot and his family and Elisha and his soldiers) from the hands of the 'bad people' (the men of Sodom and the soldiers of the King of Aram who wanted to capture Elisha). It was a temporary solution, short-lived and for a very specific purpose. It was not mass hysteria encompassing a very large group of people.

THE LARGE GROUP

The blindness that occurred during the ninth plague affected the entire Egyptian population. How is it possible for hysterical blindness to afflict an entire nation? Large groups of people “awaken feelings of anxiety...This is probably due to the weaker container function of the large group, fluidity of boundaries and the seemingly chaotic structure which awakens regressed, primary anxiety formations of feelings of fragmentation, disintegration and loss of reality.”²⁷ The Egyptians had already experienced eight frightening plagues, and now comes the ninth plague, with Moses stretching forth his arm. They are overwrought with anxiety and fears. This meshes with their uncontrolled primitive anxiety that sits on top of a fear of disintegration²⁸ and “threat of annihilation.”²⁹ Those in a continuous anxiety-laden atmosphere are presented with “the threat of a loss of ego identity...(which) produces regression from the Oedipal position to the oral stage.”³⁰ Emotionally, the ancient Egyptians were regressive to extremely primitive levels of thought and functioning.

The Egyptians were united in their misery and suffering with a common enemy. But rather than enabling them to revolt against the Lord of the Hebrews or to overthrow their Pharaoh, they were rendered impotent by the overwhelming miracles and plagues. Le Bon, the French social psychologist, wrote his groundbreaking work on crowds.³¹ He noted that crowds could be active and even violent (such as mobs) or they can be passive – because they lack the strength to organize. The plagues in Egypt were designed by God to subjugate the population and distract them so that the Hebrews could later escape from Egypt. The ninth plague accomplished this by rendering the Egyptians blinded and unable to prevent the eventual escape of the Hebrews. The blindness lifted before the final tenth plague, the plague of the firstborn, which was the impetus that enabled the exodus from Egypt.

NOTES

1. Psalms 105 mentions in an abbreviated fashion, 8 of the 10 plagues described in the Torah (Exodus 10:21-22). The plague of darkness is accorded a very brief mention: *He sent darkness and it was dark* (Psalms 105:28). Several biblical scholars have posited theories as to the reasons for the omission of two plagues and why the plague of darkness is mentioned first in Psalms 105's recounting of the plagues, as differed from the Torah account where it is ninth. See: W.D. Tucker, Jr. “Revisiting the Plagues in Psalm CV,” *Vetus Testamentum* 55 (2005), 401-411.
2. The Septuagint translates (Exodus 10:22): “there was darkness very black, even a storm.”
3. S.R. Driver, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), pp. 82-83.

4. Together with Francis Brown and Charles Briggs, Hebrew and Bible scholars, the famous *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) was produced. It quickly became known as BDB (Brown, Driver and Briggs).
5. F. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (Bridgeport: M. Sherman, 1828), book 2, chapter 14. Flavius Josephus was a first century Jewish general and historian who survived and recorded the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.
6. L.H. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Moses," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 83 (1993), p. 309, fn. 168.
7. In a parallel vein, a lack of oxygen, hypoxia, could lead to blindness. The plague of darkness could have been associated with an absence of oxygen among the Egyptians.
8. *Midrash Tanhūmah* (VaYeshev, 4). An interesting story is told in TB *Megilah* 24b that adds additional meaning to *as the blind gropeth in darkness* (Deuteronomy 28:29). Rabbi Yossi relates his astonishment in seeing a blind person walking in the darkness of night with a burning torch and asks the blind person why he needs a torch if he is blind! The blind person remarks: so that others will see me and help me to avoid open pits and obstructions in my path.
9. This is the first time Saul of Tarsus, a first century apostle, is called by his Roman name.
10. F. Josephus, *Against Apion*. One of the pharaohs, Apepi, was part of the Hyksos 'nation' that reigned during the 15th dynasty in Egypt. They were from the East (Asia) but "there was in them a Semitic strain" (S. Moscati, *Ancient Semitic Civilizations* (New York: Capicorn Books/Putnam, 1960), p.110). The Hyksos ruled from 1674 BCE – 1535 BCE. This date falls somewhere in-between the accepted date for the Exodus (1446 BCE) and the Ipuwer Papyrus (19th – 18th century BCE).
11. There is a vast literature that attempts to explain the intensification of the plague of darkness as a merger of several 'documents' in "the pentateuchal redactor's work." C.R. Moss & J. Stackert, "The Devastation of Darkness: Disability in Exodus 10:21-23,27, and Intensification in the Plagues," *The Journal of Religion* 92 (2012), p. 365.
12. There are various philosophical understandings of 'deconstruction.' See: H. Silverman, ed., *Derrida and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
13. Amaurosis is defined medically as partial or complete loss of sight occurring without a perceptible change in the eye. See: R. Enzenauer, W. Morris, T. O'Donnell & J. Montrey, *Functional Ophthalmic Disorders: Ocular Malingering and Visual Hysteria*, (New York: Springer International, 2014),chapter 2. Also, F.E.Burch, "Hysterical Amblyopia and Amaurosis," *American Journal of Ophthalmology* 10 (1925), pp. 699-712.
14. *Midrash Tanhūmah* (Va'Eira, 13).
15. V. Biousse & D. Trobe, "Transient Monocular Visual Loss," *American Journal of Ophthalmology* 140 (2005), p.717.
16. E. Aloni, "Transient Monocular Visual Loss," (2013) (Retrieved from: www.medicalmedia.co.il/publications/PrintArticle.aspx?artid=6589&sheetid=499), p.1, Hebrew.
17. Biousse & Trobe, p.717. Blank or fuzzy vision fits-in well with the Bible's description of the darkness as *darkness which may be felt* (Exodus 10:21). There is a tangible quality to the feeling. The flashes, sparkles or scintillations paradoxically describe brilliant light flashes which eventually lead to temporary blindness, *a thick darkness* (Exodus 10:22).

18. Hypoxia is a deficiency in oxygen reaching tissues of the body. Some of the symptoms are similar in patients experiencing overwhelming stress: confusion, shortness of breath and rapid breathing. Typical symptoms after suffering from eight plagues!
19. A.J. Tatham, "Transient Loss of Vision," (2015) (Retrieved from: <http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/1435495-overview#showall>), p.2. This should not be confused with Baruch HaLevi Epstein's (1860-1941) idea found in his commentary *Torah Temimah* (Exodus 10:21, note 2) that there was a covering on the eyes of all of the Egyptians, a type of cataract. Cataracts are not reversible and would not come and go so quickly. Interestingly, Epstein co-opted this idea, without attribution, from Yaacov Zvi Meklenburg's (1785-1865) commentary *HaKetav ve HaKabbalah*.
20. University of Kansas Medical Center, (Retrieved from: http://www.kumc.edu/AMA-MSS/Study/pdx_chapter10.htm).
21. The Kahun Papyrus, discovered in 1889 by Flinders Petrie of University College in London, are a collection of ancient Egyptian texts dating back to 1825 BCE (during the Middle Kingdom of Egypt). The texts cover a variety of topics, one of which is medical. These medical treatises deal mainly with gynecological illnesses and conditions (section V).
22. It is very hard to include men into the diagnosis of hysteria, which translates from the Greek as: 'displaced womb.' G.Duby & M. Perrot, *History of Women in the West from the Renaissance to Modern* (Bari: Oxford University Press, 1991) reveled against 'uterine fury.'
23. D. Landy, "Role Adaptation: Traditional Curers under the Impact of Western Medicine," *American Ethnologist* 1(1974), p.121.
24. J.P. Hess, "The Changing Role of the Yemenite Mori," In A. Kiev (ed.), *Magic, Faith and Healing* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press), 1964).
25. In the Lexicon of Wilhelm Gesenius, *Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldaicum* [Hebrew and Chaldean Lexicon] (Leipzig: Vogelii, 1833), a German orientalist, in the original Latin, *afel* is translated as: dark and gloomy and *afaila* is translated as: dense and thick. Clearly, *afaila* conveys the intention of obscuring vision.
26. There is a vascular etiology for transient visual loss.
27. H. Weinberg & S. Schneider, "Background, Structure and Dynamics of the Large Group," In S. Schneider & H. Weinberg (eds.), *The Large Group Re-Visited: The Herd, Primal Horde, Crowds and Masses* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), pp. 18-19.
28. H. Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977), pp. 104-105.
29. D.W. Winnicott, "The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship", In D.W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (London: Hogarth, 1960), p. 47.
30. D. Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 156, 159. See also, E. Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984). Canetti studied the interplay of crowds and discussed the impact of plagues and epidemics: "The element of contagion which plays so large a part in an epidemic has the effect of making people separate from each other", pp. 273-275. Elias Canetti was a gifted novelist who wrote in German and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981. Some of his non-fiction works had a political direction: the Vienna Anschluss (a trilogy) and a study of crowd behavior, mob violence and religious behavior. His ancestors were Sephardi Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492.
31. G. Le Bon, *The Crowd* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1952).



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